

Carroll County Times "Carroll's Yesteryears" Articles

Carroll's Yesteryears
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In 1881, The Big One shook Carroll
By Joe Getty

"Who Can Explain It? This city and vicinity was the scene of some sort of an explosion on Sunday night last, and the matter has not been solved. About 9 o'clock a loud rumbling noise, like the explosion of a steam boiler, was heard by a great many people and of course every one asked somebody else if they had heard it too. In the East end of Westminster it sounded like the noise was at the West end and at the West end it sounded like it was at the East end. Some of the suburban residents called up people in town and made inquiry about the noise while some people in town called up friends in the suburbs and inquired if anything had exploded out their way. It seemed to be in a great many places at the same time. No one has been able to explain it and we suspect it will remain so." *American Sentinel* newspaper, January 28, 1910.

What caused the loud explosion? An explanation that it was a fallen comet was provided by the *Democratic Advocate* newspaper. "On Sunday night the citizens of Westminster and as far as Thurmont were frightened by an explosive sound which the people thought to be an earthquake but up to this time nothing definitive has been heard. The rumors were afloat on Monday that the peculiar sound on Sunday night was a comet which fell in the vicinity of Spring Mills and plowed up a deep hole in the earth on the farm of Mrs. Wagner."

Actually, it was an earthquake. Recent tremors in Howard County served as a reminder that this region of Piedmont Maryland occasionally experiences tremors. Seismologists who have researched the recent tremors propose that these movements are traced to the "Rock Hill Dike" that runs through Maryland north to the Lancaster, Pennsylvania, vicinity. Several tremors similar to the 1910 experience have occurred in Carroll County during the 20th century.

Apparently the strongest documented earthquake in the county occurred on January 4, 1881. Tremors accompanied by loud noises were strong enough to vibrate houses. The impact of this earthquake was reported in the January 8, 1881 edition of the *American Sentinel*.

"A series of seismic explosions, which were felt to a greater or less degree by nearly everybody in Westminster, occurred here between 2 and 3 o'clock Monday morning.

"Three distinct explosions were heard, followed by vibrations of the earth's surface. Houses rocked, doors rattled and pictures fell from their fastenings. Most citizens were awakened, many of them with no well defined idea of what disturbed them, other, remembering past occurrences,

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alive to all the causes of their uneasiness. Various experiences have been related. All seem to agree on the number of reports, however.

"The experiences of Hon. F.T. Shaw seems to be that of the majority. He was awakened by hearing a loud report – something like the blasting of rock in a well, he called it - - followed at short intervals by two others. His first impression was that an explosion had occurred in the drugstore of A.H. Huber immediately adjoining his property. Afterward it occurred to him that it might be an attempt by some one to blow open the safe at the bank.

"The mysterious sounds heard in the early morning seem to have had forerunners in a slighter degree. During Sunday a number of people noticed noises of an unusual kind early in the afternoon and night.

"A rumbling noise followed by a report was heard at 5 o'clock on Sunday evening at the residence of Mrs. Wm. N. Hayden. It was thought at the time that a chimney had fallen.

"Mr. Samuel Roop, residing about three miles north of town, was startled by an explosion of a like nature at 9 o'clock. Mr. and Mrs. Roop thoroughly examined the house, in the belief that some ordinary cause had produced the noise. Finding everything undisturbed, they retired. Mr. Roop heard similar noises throughout the night.

"At the residence of Mr. Emanuel Mackley a picture was thrown from the wall by the rocking of the house. Mr. Mackley gives the time as between 2 and 3 o'clock in the morning.

"About the same hour J.A. Mitchell, Esq., was awakened by a dull, rumbling sound, then a report, the latter resembling the blasting of rock. His house was rocked and shaken.

"Mr. Daniel Hess residing at Harney, 16 miles north of Westminster, heard an explosion at about 3 o'clock. This was followed by others. His house was badly shaken.

"Hon. Chas. B. Roberts was awakened by a noise which sounded to him as if some one was breaking into his house. This was soon followed by a louder report which he says, resembled the blasting of rocks.

"Mr. John Gerke heard the noise and his house was shaken. Monday morning he found that the plaster on his bed room had been loosened and shaken from the wall.

"From various points in the county reports are coming in indicating that the chocks were continued to the upper part of the county. South of Westminster they were not perceptible. The

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inhabitants of Union Bridge were generally awakened. They attributed the unusual sounds to the cracking of the ice. Finding Monday morning that the ice was intact upon the ponds, they were at a loss to assign a reason until the reports from the surrounding towns showed the disturbance to have been general.

"A similar phenomenon, which may have some connection with the latter disturbances, we noted about 2:30 o'clock Sunday afternoon by Mr. and Mrs. William Moore. At that hour they were startled by a flash of lightning in a cloudless sky followed by a rumbling which sounded to them like thunder.

"Reports from Taneytown, Harney, New Windsor and Middleburg show that the shocks were felt in those places at about the same hour. At Taneytown Mr. Harry M. Clabaugh says that he was awakened by a loud noise about 3 o'clock, and thought that a 1000 pound weight attached to his gas machine had fallen. Another explosion followed the first one, but he felt no vibrations. A gentleman and his wife say that they distinctly heard it thunder and saw lightning Sunday afternoon.

"Tuesday night Mr. F.E. Cootes, proprietor of the Anchor Hotel, at the West end of town, was awakened in the middle of the night by a sound resembling an explosion of some kind. He got up and went through the house, and examined every place, but found that nothing had been disturbed.

"Col. Longwell, Mr. Thomas and a number of other gentlemen heard the same peculiar noises, for which they were unable to account.

"Some persons think the noise is caused by the cracking of the ice, which is so hard and solid over streets and fields that no impression is made upon it by pedestrians and even heavier bodies, but all are at a loss to account for the rattling of windows and the shaking of pictures and ornaments on the wall."